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**Title:** When Ethnography Does Not Rhyme with Anonymity...

*Reflections on Names Disclosure, Self-Censorship and Storytelling*

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**Abstract:** Maintaining informants' confidentiality is a cornerstone of ethical clearance in most academic institutions' boards, and a pre-requisite to conduct ethnographic fieldwork. However, this prescriptive environment does not account for the diversity of contemporary ethnographic fieldwork, and little has been written on the challenges faced by anthropologists who may need to identify participants in their research by their name. What are the specific empirical and theoretical implications of non-anonymous ethnographies? Drawing on accounts from a research conducted between 2007 and 2013 among Iraqi artists in exile, this study presents a situation that did not allow for protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of informants. This paper reflects on some of the challenges associated with name disclosure in anthropological research, and questions implications for both the participants and the researcher. This paper finally explores avenues to tackle barriers to unveil the collective in non-anonymous ethnographies across and beyond artists' tales of creative individualities.

**Keywords:** Anonymity, Ethnography, Creative Practices, Syria, Iraqi Artists



## Introduction

In 2007, I arrived in Damascus to undertake my first ethnographic fieldwork for my MSc thesis that would later lead to a multi-sited PhD project in anthropology. My research initially encompassed the transnational dynamics of exiled Iraqis circulating outside refugee camps. After a few weeks spent with Damascus-based Iraqi artists met through my initial contacts, my focus slowly drifted from studying “transnational migration” to “artistic practices in exile”. As I will demonstrate in this paper, this shift had consequences on the anonymity and confidentiality of information generated on the field. I had anticipated some of the difficulties related to researching migration in an authoritative political context. I was however not prepared to collaborate with artists with a portfolio and a name attached to it, a name that could not be anonymised for the sake of my own work. Disclosing these names throughout the research process had important implications. A methodological literature on the need to protect informants’ identity and its complex practicalities is available for researchers (Tolich 2004), as well as platforms to debate the “one size fits all” internal review boards formats (Lederman, 2006). Scholars have also explored the use or misuse of informed consent in various academic settings (Fassin, 2008; Lambek et al., 2015); and in various places of fieldwork including tense political contexts (Tittensor, 2016). Literature touching upon the failures of maintaining confidentiality within the communities among whom anthropologists conduct research shows that the use of pseudonyms is not always effective (Sheper Hugues, 1979; Whyte,

1981). Confidentiality breaches enabling a neighbour, a colleague, or a friend to identify protagonists of an ethnography have long-term implications for individuals (Scheper-Hughes, 1979). Mutual expectations woven into ethnographic encounters raise the question of how trust, betrayal (Monsutti, 2007) and friendship (Driessen, 1998) come into play in the different stages of the research, including in written accounts of field experiences and their reception by the “ethnographied”. Nevertheless, little has been written on the challenges faced by anthropologists who need to identify participants in their research by their name. Beyond challenges encountered by ethnographers to ensure confidentiality of the research, what are the specific empirical and theoretical implications of non-anonymous ethnographies? How can the ethnographer account for power relationships shaping societies and communities in this constrained context?

Drawing on ethnographic accounts from my PhD conducting research between 2007 and 2013 among Iraqi artists in exile (Author, 2014), this paper describes a specific situation that did not allow for protecting the anonymity and the confidentiality of my informants. For the scope of this paper, I focus on experiences of (re)negotiating access to reflect on some of the challenges associated with name disclosure in anthropological research, and to question implications for both the participants and the researcher. I finally explore avenues to tackle barriers to dissemination through unveiling the collective across and beyond artists’ tales of creative individualities, and through the development of collaborative approaches to storytelling.

## **Ethnographic Encounters in Times of Mobility and Creativity**

My first ethnographic fieldwork in Syria as an MSc Student was not my first trip to this destination. I had spent summers at my grandmother's house in the coastal city of Latakia as a child. Far from providing me with any sense of comfort, my prior knowledge of the field curbed my enthusiasm: the constant warnings of my family to avoid "sensitive" topics and my awareness of the local politics triggered waves of anxiety. This anticipated familiarity, however, vanished once I reached the field. "Hanging out" with Iraqis in Damascus, I got to explore new neighbourhoods, new cafés and build new relationships. The people I met made me feel like a guest, making sure that I was settling in Damascus and always offering support. Interestingly, Iraqis were themselves considered as guests (*daiifs*) by the government as Arab citizens residing in Syria.

Working with migrants in an authoritative state means that every step of the research must be taken extra-slowly and extra-cautiously. I arrived in Damascus with a "list of Iraqi contacts" based in Syria. This list had been provided by a Geneva-based Iraqi writer I had interviewed a few months earlier. When I arrived in Damascus I arranged meetings with members of my list, I knew very little about them and how they were connected to each other. Every meeting I arranged brought me back to the same Damascus downtown café: the *Rawda*. The beginnings of my fieldwork followed the exact same routine. It usually started with a meeting with an Iraqi artist or intellectual in the *Rawda* café, followed by another meeting with some of his friends, frequently in a little café composed of a few

tables on the narrow pavement in the old neighbourhood of *Sarouja* in Damascus. Occasionally, we would go to an exhibition or a play together. Some nights, the meeting would continue into the night with a glass *Araq* in a restaurant in *Bab Touma* in the heart of the old city. This waltz across the city lasted for a few weeks, until my presence among them became less intrusive. A few weeks during which I did not take any notes except in my own bedroom at the end of a busy day. A few weeks during which I did not conduct interviews. The relationship was conversational, but not informal.

Interestingly, Iraqi artists and intellectuals were first considered as an entry point into the world of “real” refugees, or in other words as possible gatekeepers. But meeting with an artist inexorably led me to another artist, until they became the core of my research. One defining moment took place one morning in the *Rawda* café. I had realised at that point that I could show up in the morning uninvited and find people to sit with and chat. An Iraqi man in particular, Abu Halub<sup>1</sup>, was a feature of the café. Not once had I entered this place without seeing him, waving at me through the window that separated the crowded café from the street. I was told that on the two occasions when the *Rawda* café had closed - once on the day the owners’ mother passed away, and once when Hafez Al-Assad died - Abu Halub sat all day on a chair in front of the café. He had arrived in Damascus in 1979 and had been at the heart of the social, cultural and intellectual life of Iraqis in

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<sup>1</sup> Participants’ names were not anonymised in this paper

Damascus for decades when I met him. When an Iraqi arrived in Damascus from Baghdad, Amman, Europe, America or elsewhere, he would come and sit with Abu Halub and find out who had arrived, who had left, and where they had gone. This ritual would also be part of my fieldwork when touching base again in Damascus after a year in Switzerland: I would always start by greeting Abu Halub at the Rawda and get fresh updates. It was Abu Halub who, after our second encounter, introduced me to his friends as a researcher “working with Iraqi artists and intellectuals in Damascus”. At that time, I did not contradict him and his insightful comment justified my presence on the field. Abu Halub’s foresight became reality though: I was indeed embarking on a journey “with Iraqi artists and intellectuals in exile”. This shift from researching migration through the category of “refugees” to researching exile through artists and intellectuals profoundly reshaped my own ethnographic practice.

While “hanging out” with artists was acceptable in Damascus, it was a matter of safety for the participants and myself not to be seen in a situation where I would be taking notes while an artist was talking. Negotiating access in this setting mainly consisted in not rushing into organising one to one interviews, until time passed and the relationship I developed with artists led to invitations into the artists’ private environment. In Damascus, being able to open the doors to their studio was key. Participants orally consented to be interviewed and recorded in this setting. Information sheets and consent were not routinely used in my university at that time, following a Francophone tradition



of addressing ethics issue by training students to protect their informants through a certain research ethos rather than through the formalisation and normalisation of ethical procedures (Fassin 2008). When negotiating the interview, I was willing to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of my informants and was surprised to discover that this was not an option for them. I was interviewing them as “migrants” or “refugees”, they were answering as “writers”, “painters”, “sculptors” etc... This discrepancy was significant in my work. Artists wanting to be named in my research can be linked to an aspiration of recognition or publicity. I recently gave a talk in a conference that was touching upon a specific artwork by an artist I have worked with for many years. At the end of the presentation, someone from the audience came to me because he was interested in the work this artist. I spontaneously handed him over the exhibition catalogue I was carrying in my bag when preparing my presentation. A colleague and friend of mine witnessed the scene and ironically commented on me promoting “my artists”. This anecdote is meaningful as I was indeed hoping at this moment that the conference could create interest for this artist’s work even if it was not the purpose of my presentation. Conducting ethnographic work with artists in quest of recognition questions the tools anthropologist might use to access and account for ways in which individuals relate to their social world beyond and across what is voiced and framed in terms of “talent” or “individual creative forces”.

Over my fieldwork, the more I tried to capture ways in which my interlocutors were belonging to the world, the less the idea of confidentiality was relevant. Ways of seeing the world was part of a complex creative process for these artists in motion, and conducting ethnography in artists' studios opened the door for integrating their artistic production in the research. In this context, renouncing to maintain confidentiality can also allow to embrace a co-production of narratives of exile composed of conversational, textual and visual layers, and in the context of the social lives in which they are embedded, while posing specific challenges for dissemination.

### **Whose anonymity are we protecting?**

It is 2016. Time has passed and I am now based in an academic institution in the UK where I undertake ethnographic work in Senegal. One of the first steps of designing the research consisted in drafting information sheets and consent forms for interviewees to sign. Ensuring confidentiality is one of the cornerstones of ethical approval mechanisms. Back from a first period of preliminary fieldwork in Senegal, I started analysing my data and writing abstracts for conferences. Looking at interviews transcripts and fieldnotes without having to tie them to a name strangely comforted me, and provided me with a feeling of freedom. I looked back at the treatment I had made of the life stories interviews I conducted with Iraqi artists and intellectuals in exile for my PhD. Participants in my doctoral research had a name and a body of work attached to them and this was not to be

disregarded in the research. Between accountability and self-censorship, it is essential to reflect on the implications of not being able to maintain anonymity of informants in research. It raises questions around the protection of informants, but it also poses challenges for the anthropologists as writers and agents in their own research.

When collecting data for my PhD, my concerns were close to any other anthropologists on the field: how can I build a trusting relationship with the people I am working with? How can I protect them? How do I know if this was said “off the record”? In the artists’ studios in Damascus, what was said on the record was to some extent the translation of the public image artists wanted to convey as exiled artists and would only provide original insights on lived experiences of migration in the context of a broader ethnographic fieldwork. This is where protecting informants who did not wish to be anonymised was difficult to reconcile with an in-depth and comprehensive treatment of the data. After having transcribed my interviews, read fieldnotes and looked at my pictures again and again, I felt a discomfort converting all the stories from the field into a manuscript. Once very comfortable writing, something was holding me back. Telling stories, portraying men and women, using their name, using this information to enrich anthropological theories: it all seemed overwhelming. The dissemination process was caught in a double disclosure: by disclosing the names of the participants, I was at the same time openly exhibiting my own use of the material I collected on the field. Ultimately, disclosing

informants' names can make the researcher feel vulnerable as it also means disclosing his own identity: when ensuring confidentiality, are we only protecting our sources, partners, collaborators and friends? Are we also protecting ourselves? Are we protecting the relationships we built day after day, year after year, on the field?

### **Situating storytelling in collective practices**

*“On the highest deck –  
In the lowest dump  
As well – there is always  
A story-teller*

*The story  
Must be told  
Whose story, mine or yours?  
Perhaps...his, or hers?*

*No matter from whose  
point of view, it will be told:  
you making up a story  
full of gaps about me?  
I, narrating your tragi-comical tale?  
Perhaps, He, the one  
Ignorant of all our days?*

*It will be told”*

*Sargon Boullos, The Story will be told*

As an anthropologist chasing stories of exile, I encountered artists telling stories through their own media. Exile was part of those stories:

*I am nothing if not a storyteller. My work to date has been concerned with the communication of public and private information to an audience so that it may be retold, distributed. The stories I tell are political dramas, which unfold through my past experience and into the present where they interact with the currency of media as the dialectic of aesthetic pleasure and pain. Through various layers of distribution and interpretation, pictures are drawn using interactive models established through the stories' (technological) framework where they are revealed and shared. With an audience locked in participation, my story may be retold.*<sup>2</sup>

Identifying artists by their name sheds light on intertwined narratives of exile. The artist and the researcher can find themselves trapped in this co-production of narratives if the researcher acts as a spokesperson who would be able to voice the discourses artists produce on themselves, only to reach a different audience. Against the illusion of “speaking for the voiceless”, the ethnographer can shed light on the complex dynamics shaping talent and individuality, and on the embeddedness of creativity in power, places, instability, routines, and relationships (etc...) In my research, spending time with artists in the site where they create stresses the potential of artworks to explore meanings, values and practices associated to mobility.

The artist's studio is the physical site of creation *par excellence*. The studio is often imagined as a sort of refuge where creative minds and bodies find the peacefulness required to produce art. However, artists' studios are also spaces of social encounters, where people, practices and values interact. In fact, it is common practice to share studios

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<sup>2</sup> <http://wafaabilal.com/thirdi/>, accessed 28/09/2012

with fellow artists, or to host friends, or journalists in these places. Studios can become incredibly busy places. In Damascus, I often visited artists Riyadh Neemeh and Jaber Alwan in their respective studios. The first one was situated in the *Sarouja* area, in a sober and warm apartment. It was a pivotal meeting place for Riyadh and his friends and colleagues, an occasion to discuss freely after a sweet tea in the street café nearby, and see his work progressing on a daily basis. At that time, he was working on a series of children close-up portraits painted after a series of photographs taken in Iraq. Jaber's studio was situated in his flat at the heart of a Damascene residential area. One could hear the sound of an Italian opera when approaching the flat. Jaber used to open the door with a pencil in the hand and wearing his apron. Jaber's place was also central to social life of the artists I was getting to know for my research. After the studio, the kitchen and the living room were pivotal social spaces. Paintings were present in the flat like an extension of the studio. Encounters at Jaber's were less spontaneous. Jaber used to live in Italy and he liked to treat his Iraqi friends with pasta. He also introduced them to Italian movies. Evenings at Jaber's were somehow more formal and reflect his position in the group. Jaber left Iraq in the 1970s, obtained the Italian citizenship, bought a place in Damascus. He is more established despite sharing in a sense of in-betweenness with Iraqi artists belonging to younger generations. As an ethnographer evolving around these lives in motion, my role was not to voice participants' concern or mediate their narratives. In contrast, I attempted to capture this sense of in-betweenness and its embodiments in

relationships, discourses, practices and artefacts. As emphasised by Schneider and Wright (2006: 26), ethnographies of artistic contemporary practices constitute field of interconnections: “Artists and Anthropologists are practitioners who appropriate from, and represent, others. Although their representational practices have been different, both books and artwork are creative additions to the world; both are complex translations of other realities”. The migration stories I narrate in my research were inspired by the stories I collected on the field. They were also sometimes competing with the stories artists were telling through their artwork.

Collaborating with artists from fieldwork practices (Calzadilla and Marcus, 2006) to creative inputs do not allow for reconciliation between competing stories, but for a thorough and creative documentation of the negotiation processes at stake. Lessons from collaborating with artists cannot be generalised to all ethnographic studies, and in most cases, maintaining confidentiality is the preferred option to account for the politics and intimacies of social worlds. However, this example shows that some situations restrict the ethnographer in his ability to produce confidential ethnographies, leading him to develop alternative processes in the research. As Rappaport (2008: 8) highlights: “converting collaboration into a charged and fruitful methodology (...) can occur only when we shift control of the research process out of the ethnographer’s hands”. Disclosing names in anthropological research questions the “do not harm” attitude anthropologists

are encouraged to adopt by some ethical review boards, and offers an avenue to move from protection to collaboration. The ethnographic encounter between the anthropologist and the artist reveals a dynamic understanding of exile where the daily routine of being displaced in a city meets iconographic and verbal representations of the homeland. First hand descriptions of places – artists’ studios, cafes, galleries etc – and accounts of migratory aesthetics (Durrant and Lord 2007) with all the emotion attached are intertwined and can contribute to the creation of an ephemeral relational space where exile can be captured, and disappear again.

## **Conclusion**

Through specific encounters with Iraqi artists in exile, this paper opened the black box of ethnographic situations that constraint the ability of certain anthropologists to maintain anonymity and confidentiality in their field accounts. Renouncing to anonymity in ethnographic research can trigger specific implications for both the anthropologist and the participants. If the ethnographer is not methodologically equipped to deal with them, name disclosure can make participants and the researcher vulnerable. The will to protect the informant while identifying him by his name can lead to a weaker argument and constrain the scope of a study. In this context, anthropologists need to develop alternative forms of storytelling to pave the way for fruitful methodologies converting vulnerabilities into creative co-production of knowledge, and leading to renewed theories. This implies



the creation of spaces where anthropologists can discuss ethnographic practices across and beyond the strict rule of confidentiality assurance.

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